

Criminal Damage to a Church

Three boys (aged 16-17) broke church windows and wrote offensive words around the church door. Reparation was carried out

Background

Three 16 and 17 year old boys were sitting in a churchyard one sunny Sunday afternoon, slightly bored and with a catapult. They started to aim stones at the windows of the church, small diamond leaded paned windows and broke quite a number of them. One of them wrote some offensive words around the church door. The Curate had seen them and the police were called. All three were charged with criminal damage and given Final Warnings. This was the only green space in this neighbourhood, a deprived inner city area. With the knowledge and consent of the Vicar, the church grounds were used by many people to enjoy the peace and quiet and appreciate the mature trees. Children also played there and the church hall was used by many groups, including mother and toddler groups, pensioners' and women's groups. Many people took great pride in the church which was very old and beautiful. Until then there had been no damage. The damage and the writing upset many people, especially the older ones who saw the church as an important and central part of the community, a community they had seen deteriorating quite severely in recent years. After the Final Warnings, the boys were referred to Restorative Justice to see what could be done in this case.

Restorative Justice Intervention

I made contact with the Vicar and the Curate of the church and discussed with them at some length the various options. They were quite willing, in fact eager, to meet with the boys and discuss the impact on the community, which was substantial. They also wanted the opportunity to express their views directly. The boys had not considered any of the consequences of their actions while they were doing what they did, and had not thought much about it since. For one of them the most disturbing thing had been that the police still had his hooded jacket and bandana which they had kept for evidence. However, after a long discussion with me, they accepted that there might be a wider view and all agreed to meet with the Vicar and the Curate. The mother of one of the boys was particularly upset as this was the church in which she and his father had got married, and where her son had been baptised. She was wholeheartedly in support of the meeting. We arranged a mediation session at the church hall and I agreed to pick

up all three boys and bring them to the church. The meeting went well, with all three boys listening closely to the Vicar and thinking about what he and the Curate said. They apologised and explained why they did what they did, and the one boy even owned up about his links with the church. The boys agreed with the Vicar and the Curate that they would come back to the church and do some weeding and ground work. I had told the boys not to wear their usual trendy clothing and particularly not the bandanas. They all came smartly dressed and clearly very anxious to make a good impression. We arranged the reparation session after consultation with the elderly gentleman who kept the grounds in good order on a voluntary basis. It was a very hot sunny day and unfortunately they took to heart my comments about their clothing a little too well. None of them had even thought to bring a hat to protect their heads, so I had to lend them the ones belonging to my children that were in the car – which did not please them as my children are very young! They worked very hard for 3-4 hours, weeding and clearing ground so that broken grave stones could be laid flat. We even had to move some toads that were living under one of the broken grave stones – actually I had to do that – the brave teenagers could not bring themselves to touch them! Members of the community saw them there, asked what they were doing and were very pleased when they were told. This piece of restorative justice has restored a community, given the boys the chance to be reintegrated (the ban on them entering the churchyard has been lifted), allowed them the opportunity to apologise and be forgiven, and allowed the victims and the community the opportunity to express their views and receive reparative work. A very good result for work over an eight-week period.